

DOING WHAT IT TAKES

Attorneys Serve Community Needs

By **Crickett Gibbons**

The next appointment on Bob Gabrielse’s calendar was penciled in after a conversation at church just two days prior. It’s with a family he has helped before. As a sole-practitioner attorney in the small town of DeMotte – population approximately 4,000 – Gabrielse is used to people approaching him in the community or stopping by his office to ask for advice.

“I have clients who have been with me for 30, 40 years (and) they feel free to stop in to see me,” he shares. “I may have nothing set on my official schedule for the next three days and still have 15 people stop in. That happens. That’s OK.

“I’ve become their attorney and their friend as well,” Gabrielse adds. “They trust me.”

Martin C. Harker, a third-generation attorney at Kiley, Harker & Certain in Marion, echoes Gabrielse’s sentiments about connecting with clients when practicing in a smaller community and often helping those

who are also friends.

“It’s nice when people call you because they need your assistance,” Harker notes. “They trust you. They are looking for your guidance. You may see them at the grocery store. You may see them at the YMCA, and they stop and ask.”

These relationships work both ways, like when his water heater broke at 9:30 the night before our interview and he could pick up the phone to make a call.

“All I had to do was turn off my water, and they were there to fix it at 8:30 this morning. When you’re able to help people in your profession, in a small community, they are also ready to reciprocate in your time of need. It’s real. It happens,” he recalls with a chuckle.

Helping however needed

Both Harker and Gabrielse readily admit that impromptu meetings in town or, in Gabrielse’s case, people stopping by the office, can make for longer hours, but they genuinely welcome opportunities to help. Even when that means referring someone to another practice.

“We try to be problem solvers,” Harker says about his firm. “If we are not able to provide assistance, we are the first to try to

help find someone who can. When you’re in a small community, you’re often representing friends. You want to do what’s best for them. If that means you need to call someone from Indianapolis or Fort Wayne, that’s fine. We have no problem doing that to make sure our clients get the assistance they need.”

Current clients include the local hospital, mental health center, school corporation, municipalities, banks and other businesses, and community members whose legal needs range from estate planning and family law matters to criminal defense.

“Being in a small town, we serve the needs of the community,” he relates.

The approach seems to have worked for the 99-year-old firm of six attorneys in a community with a population of about 28,000.

Originally Condo, Van Atta and Batton, Harker’s grandfather, Albert L. Harker, joined the practice in the 1930s. Throughout the subsequent decades, the firm has changed names as well as adapted to the times.

“When my grandfather started, he did a lot of railroad litigation because that was the primary mode of transportation at the time. That evolved into vehicles, and we were more involved in motor vehicle accident litigation through insurance companies,” Harker shares. Now, that area is often handled by in-house counsel or more specialized firms.

The ability to specialize within the legal profession is one difference between practicing in a larger area and a smaller community, Harker points out. For example, Kiley, Harker & Certain may represent a bank for guardianship or collections cases and perform corporate legal work for the hospital, but it doesn’t specialize in banking regulations or health care law.

“When you work in a big city, you are able to focus on an area of law to practice in. With access to a larger population, the economics allow that. Whereas in a small community, you have to handle whatever comes in the door,” he explains.

Building relationships

As a sole practitioner, Gabrielse is a little more selective in the cases or work he accepts. “There are a lot of things I don’t do,” he states. “I don’t do taxes. I don’t do workmen’s comp. Many lawyers live on DUIs



Three generations of Harkers have practiced at the law office of Kiley, Harker & Certain in Marion. The firm has been in business since 1919, although under different names. Pictured (from left) are attorneys Adrienne Rines-Hammond, Evan Hammond, Martin “Marty” Harker, Al Harker, Joe Certain and Rodney Faulkare (Eric Marshall photo).



DeMotte attorney Bob Gabrielse and his wife, Arla, along with 55 to 60 volunteers, build hand-powered mobility carts for African villagers who can't walk. Gabrielse helps adjust one of the carts for a double amputee in Swaziland.

and divorces. Those are sort of a mainstay of a lot of law practices, and I do neither one of those." He also doesn't practice criminal law.

Other than these, Gabrielse says his is a general practice "with the exception that I just do the things I really enjoy doing." This includes probate, estates, real estate, general business law and, interestingly, wrongful death cases, of which he's handled 25 to 30. For these, he works with another firm for the trial aspect.

Without advertising – or even a web site – Gabrielse's clients come from referrals and people-to-people interaction, including at the Jasper County Courthouse in Rensselaer, about a 25- to 30-minute drive. "I live way in the north end of the county, but I go down there. I have a good relationship with people. I'm decent to them. I can sit and chat with them. And they trust me. So they end up coming up here to see me."

His desire to help others extends beyond DeMotte and Jasper County to undeveloped areas of Central America and Africa. Gabrielse juggles his law commitments with 15 to 25 hours a week overseeing the production of hand-powered mobility carts to ship to people living in rural villages in Africa who can't walk. He and his wife, Arla, who is also active in the Mobility Ministry and works part time at the Gabrielse law office, have a longstanding commitment to service, previously building Christian schools in Central America.

Growing business through referrals

Attorney Connie Bauswell's growing business is a bit different from the others in that it is not a general practice. She also has two offices – in Valparaiso and Schererville – drawing from a significantly larger base than Gabrielse in Jasper County, which has a population roughly equivalent to that of Valparaiso alone.

After gaining experience in a variety of

legal areas early in her career, Bauswell later limited her own practice entirely to elder law and estate planning, including special needs.

Like Gabrielse, she also builds her business mainly through word of mouth and referrals, while also giving informational talks in the community and within the Elder Law Section of the Indiana State Bar Association.

"Most of my clients are in northwest Indiana and the surrounding counties, but I do have clients from all throughout the state," notes Bauswell, who is a Certified Elder Law Attorney (CELA) through the National Elder Law Foundation.

"I really like that I am able to help people, in a measurable way, receive appropriate care and legitimately protect their assets," she comments.

Bauswell has moved her Valparaiso office three times since June 2004 after outgrowing the space – and says she needs to move again. Her staff consists of paralegals, an office manager and receptionist; an "of counsel" attorney with his own clientele joined her office earlier in 2018 and can be a resource for real estate and corporate assistance.

With a calendar that's booked weeks in advance, Bauswell relies on technology to help her accomplish much of what she does. She also opts to work from Valparaiso as often as possible to be close to her 10-year-old son's school, where she volunteers and is a room mother.

"I love my clients. I love what I do. I'm very blessed to be able to do what I do and work in the small community I live in. I'm lucky," she reflects.



Connie Bauswell (right) practices elder care and estate planning law in her hometown of Valparaiso. Paralegal Melissa Jones and other staff members help support Bauswell's growing practice, which includes a second office in Schererville.

RESOURCES: Bob Gabrielse, Robert J. Gabrielse Law Office | Martin C. Harker, Kiley, Harker & Certain, at www.khcllegal.com | Connie Bauswell, Law Office of Connie L. Bauswell, at conniebauswell.com